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ABSTRACT

Field independence, empathy, perceived social distance, and self-esteem are being examined in this on-going investigation of the characteristics of a good language learner. The results of various measures of these four variables are being correlated with language proficiency tests and teacher and self-evaluations. It is suggested that conflicting indications to date of the impact of field dependence on language learning may be cleared up by examining its impact on classroom learning and on natural language acquisition separately. To date, empathy has not been proven to have an effect on a language learner's success, although conventional wisdom suggests that it does. Learner-perceived social distance between himself and his countrymen, himself and Americans in general, and his countrymen and Americans in general is being studied. Preliminary results of this research indicate a positive correlation between global self-esteem and the learner's oral production performance. The validity of standardized language proficiency tests as measures of communicative ability is questioned. The need for new personality measurement devices not based on North American culture is pointed out. The necessity of gathering empirical evidence to support theories of the effects of affective variables on successful second language learning is emphasized. (PMJ)

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Cognitive and Affective Characteristics of Good Language Learners[1]

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The affective and cognitive domains have now become widely accepted among second language (L2) researchers as subfields of legitimate and intense inquiry in the pursuit of a global theory of L2 acquisition. Both of these subfields appear to hold exciting possibilities for accounting for how and why humans acquire, or fail to acquire, a second language.

One of the recent methods of examining affective and cognitive variables is the study of "good" language learner characteristics. Having identified, by some external criterion (proficiency or achievement tests), the successful or proficient language learner (and, conversely, the unsuccessful learner), tests of affective and cognitive characteristics are administered to the learners to determine which, if any, characteristics are correlated with language success. The most comprehensive study of this kind is found in the Toronto Good Language Learner (GLL) study (Naiman, Fröhlich and Stern 1975). The subjects of the Toronto study were eighth, tenth and twelfth grade English speakers learning French in school in the Toronto area. Language success was determined by two proficiency measures (the listening section of the IEA Test of French Achievement and an elicited imitation test). A battery of cognitive and personality tests, teacher and student evaluations, and experimenter observations, were used to determine a host of variables. Some of these variables were: field independence, tolerance of ambiguity, category width, empathy, extroversion, instrumental and integrative orientation, motivational intensity, and ethnocentrism. The final results of the study -- while yielding a great deal of methodological information from which future researchers can profit -- were somewhat disappointing in that only two variables were found to correlate significantly with language success at all levels: field independence and tolerance of ambiguity.

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The initial disappointment of these results need not discourage future research. Many of the problems of the Toronto study centered on instrumentation and other methodological difficulties, and not on conceptualization. It was in a spirit of cautious optimism, then, that we began to undertake similar research at the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan. Four variables are being examined by the Michigan Good Language Learner research group: field independence, empathy, perceived social distance, and self-esteem. The results of various measures of the above four variables will be correlated with meas-

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ures of language success. The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency and University of Michigan English Placement Test, along with teacher evaluations and student self-evaluations, will be used to measure language "success". Subjects are adult students at the English Language Institute, of varying skill levels and cultural backgrounds.

It should be pointed out here that this is a "preliminary report" in that no results are yet available; the research is ongoing and results should be available in the fall of 1977.

Field independence.

There is a substantial amount of literature on field independence, as developed chiefly by Witkin (1962) and his colleagues. Field independence, the ability to deal with part of a field independently of the total field -- perceptual disembedding, has been studied both within Western culture and across cultures. Generally, the field independent person is more analytical and precise, and affectively more independent. The field dependent person tends to be more empathetic and open, affectively, and cognitively more perceptive of total patterns than specific items embedded within a pattern. For further information on field independence one ought to read Witkin (1962), Witkin and Berry (1975), and Witkin, Oltman, Raskin, and Karp (1971).

Two conflicting hypotheses can be drawn up with respect to the relationship of independence to L2 acquisition: (1) as in the Toronto study, the field independent person, by virtue of his penchant for analysis and disambiguation will be a successful language learner since such skills are involved in the process of inducing rules, extracting meaning, performing classroom exercises, and the like; (2) counter to the results of the Toronto study, the field dependent person will, by virtue of his empathy and social outreach, be successful in a L2 since he will be a more effective and motivated communicator. The Toronto study supported the first hypothesis; perhaps for high school age persons learning a L2 in school, where various intellectual and other classroom abilities are essential, field independence leads to success. However, a number of studies of affective variables (Guiora 1972 and Brown 1973, for example), have claimed that empathy and socialization and other field dependent characteristics are the keys to language success.

The resolution of these two hypotheses may lie in the distinction between classroom learning vs. natural language acquisition (to borrow Krashen's distinction of the two terms). Perhaps field independence is necessary for the kind of "success" which is measured by classroom-oriented activities and tests, while empathy and field dependence may be crucial factors leading to success in a more communicative, natural, non-educational setting. It is hoped that results of the current project at the University of Michigan will help to answer this question.

Empathy

Guiora (1972) pointed the way several years ago to research on the relation of empathy to L2 learning. His hypothesis was simply that the ability to empathize -- to stand in another's shoes -- is an important factor in L2 success. Guiora's criterion measure was authenticity of pronunciation (AP) -- not overall "proficiency" -- and using the Micro-momentary Expression (MME) test to measure empathy, he found a positive correlation between the two. Two major questions can be posed in assessing the relation of Guiora's (1972) study to present GLL studies: (1) is AP a valid index of language "success"? and (2) is the MME an adequate measure of empathy? The answer to the first question is obviously "no", and Guiora never claimed AP to be a global measure. The answer to the second question is "we don't know", particularly in cases where empathy is to be measured cross-culturally. The MME, designed to test psychologists' empathic response, may actually be more of a test of field independence, since the task is to perceive significant facial changes, and may be unrelated to the lay person's degree of empathy.

The second question actually poses the major obstacle for GLL studies at the University of Michigan. How can one measure "empathy" across several cultures? A myriad of empathy scales have emerged within the past two decades (Hogan 1969, Comrey 1970, and others), all quite culture-bound. The MME, unlike these empathy scales, is non-verbal, yet facial expressions represent one of the most sensitive areas of cross-cultural differences in non-verbal communication. We hope that the summer of 1977 will bring us closer to a resolution of the problem of measurement of empathy.

One would suppose that if empathy could be measured in a valid way, the successful language learner would be identified as empathic. However, the Toronto study found no effect for empathy (using Hogan's 1969 empathy scale), and it is conceivable that learning a L2 in a classroom setting requires little empathy and a great deal of analytic, field independent, book-learning skill. Again, we hope that the results of our study will shed some light on the question.

Perceived Social Distance

Schumann (1975, 1976) has dealt at some length with the notion that the social "distance" between two cultures may affect the success of language learning. William Acton (1977), a member of the Michigan GLL research group, has been pursuing an extension of Schumann's notion. Acton, however, is examining perceived social distance: the distance between the native and target culture as the learner perceives it, and where he places himself in relation to that distance. Using universal conceptual categories (with the aid of Osgood's 1976 research), Acton has devised a measure which elicits a learner's attitude toward the various categories ("the automobile", "socialism", "American women", etc.). The instrument enables the researcher to plot perceived differences between

(1) the learner himself and his countrymen in general, (2) the learner himself and Americans in general, and (3) his countrymen and Americans.

It is too early at this stage to discuss results since the research has only just begun. Acton's (1977) TESOL presentation will report methodology and preliminary results. The importance of his methodology lies in its promising predictive value and its measurement, not of actual social distance, which is in a sense irrelevant, but of perceived social distance, which is, after all, the more important psychological factor to consider.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem, the degree to which a person feel self-worth and self confidence, is another affective variable which may be significant in leading to language success. Presumably the person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego. Few studies of L2 acquisition have focused on this potentially crucial factor. Brodkey and Shore (1976), Gardner and Lambert(1972),and a few others, included measures related to self-esteem in their research; however, no conclusive results emerged on the self-esteem factor.

Heyde (1977) also a member of the Michigan GLL research group has recently been focusing on self-esteem. She is examining three levels of self esteem: global, situational, and task -- increasingly specific levels. Again, cross-cultural measurement poses a difficult problem, since most instruments are based on Western, North American society. By looking at teacher assessments of learners' self-esteem as well as learners' self-evaluations, once can begin to control for some cultural factors. Careful selection, and prudent translation, of items on scales also helps to overcome the cultural bias of the existing instruments used for measuring self-esteem, such as those found in Robinson and Shaver (1976).

Heyde's (1977) report at the TESOL Convention provides more detailed analysis of methodology and some preliminary results. These preliminary results tend to show a positive correlation between global self-esteem and the learner's oral production performance. Extensive data will be gathered in August 1977 and subsequently analyzed. At that time perhaps questions about this factor will also be answered more clearly.

Implications of the present studies

The ongoing studies described above have some interesting implications for research and teaching.

(1) Cross-cultural personality measurement. Little personality research has heretofore been carried out on second language learners in cultures outside North America. The Canadian research on learners of French as a second language benefits from the usage of established personality tests which have been validated for North American culture. At the English Language Institute we are looking primarily at learners whose native languages are Arabic, Farsi, Japanese, and Spanish. The devising of new personality tests and the adaptation of existing instruments

should provide new understanding of cross-cultural personality assesment.

(2) Measurement of language "success". For several decades we have assumed that language proficiency (in a global sense) can be measured in a reasonably valid fashion by standardized tests such as the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Can we be so sure, in our recent attention to communicative competence, discourse analysis, and the like, that such tests truly measure communicative ability? Or are the TOEFL and MTELP further extensions of educational systems which stress analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and other more strictly intellectual skills? If so, the results of the Toronto GLL study (in which field independence was correlated positively with language success as measured by proficiency tests) may be quite understandable. A good deal of testing research may be necessary in order to examine feasible alternatives to proficiency testing -- alternatives which more directly tap actual communicative competence.

(3) Field independence. The study of field independence is important for a number of reasons. It is a widely researched concept, including cross-cultural research, and represents a generally accepted mode of cognitive functioning. Field independence and dependence may be related to the distinction between acquisition and learning, as discussed above. Field dependence, highly correlated in previous research with empathy, may emerge as an important aspect of "natural" language learning while field independence may lead to success in the formal classroom; it is also conceivable that the field independent person may generate more instrumental, as opposed to integrative (field dependent), motivation. The different cognitive styles of individual students ought to be recognized by teachers and methods geared accordingly to certain students.

(4) Affective variables. Empathy, social distance, and self-esteem are all variables which appear to be highly important in accounting for L2 success or failure, yet little empirical evidence exists to support such a notion. It is hoped that our GLL research will provide the kind of empirical evidence that will lead to further fruitful research and to a better understanding of the second language learning process. Ultimately, such understanding should enable us to teach second languages more effectively.

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